

Defense spending bill passes House

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Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The U.S. House on Tuesday overwhelmingly approved a defense appropriations bill that includes billions of dollars for Connecticut contractors, but does not fund a multiyear submarine building program that could save the Pentagon more than \$115 million per ship.

The \$368.7 billion funding bill for the fiscal year beginning Oct. 1 would provide \$74.7 billion for procurement, including \$940 million for 38 Black Hawk helicopters built by Sikorsky Aircraft in Stratford. The vote was 399-19.

But lawmakers did not follow the lead of the House and Senate Armed Services Committees and lock in funding for a multiyear submarine contract with Electric Boat in Groton and its partner in the program, Newport News Shipbuilding in Virginia. The multiyear plan would call for buying seven submarines over the next five years, and allow the Pentagon to save money by making the long-term commitment.

Instead, the House funded one new Virginia Class submarine, at \$2.1 billion, but did not include \$390 million in "economic order quantity" funding or \$130 million in advanced procurement spending requested by the administration. The bill provides \$115 million to make up for the cost savings associated with the multiyear funding.

Rep. Robert R. Simmons, R-2nd District, said the move may be a negotiating tactic or reflect skepticism about the program.

"The Navy wants it, and the defense contractors have demonstrated there would be substantial savings," Simmons said. "We're

hoping the Senate can put it in their bill — it's the right thing to do."

Senators from Connecticut, Rhode Island, Virginia, and Maine have already written a letter to Senate Appropriations Committee Chairman Ted Stevens, R-Alaska, pitching the multiyear contract. The panel is reviewing the bill this week.

Overall, the bill for the year beginning Oct. 1 represents an increase of about 1.3 percent over the amount approved for this fiscal year without taking into account a \$62.4 billion midyear spending bill that paid for the war in Iraq. The 2004 bill also excludes military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, which probably will be financed by another spending bill.

A similar bill was approved with bipartisan support Tuesday by the

Senate Appropriations defense subcommittee.

Other provisions in the bill pour billions into helicopters, jet engines, and other military equipment made in the state.

The bill, said Rep. Rosa DeLauro, D-3rd District, "recognizes Connecticut's continuing strength in the defense industry" and shows a strong commitment to Sikorsky, East Hartford-based Pratt & Whitney, which makes jet engines, and the University of Connecticut.

Programs funded in the bill include:

- \$1.08 billion for development and production of the Comanche helicopter;

- \$3.9 billion for 12 C-17 Globemaster transport aircraft, powered by Pratt engines;

- \$3.5 billion for 22 F-22 Raptor fighter jets, powered by Pratt engines;

- \$4.2 billion for continued development of the Joint Strike Fighter, powered by Pratt engines;

- \$9 million for a two fuel cell demonstration programs;

- \$4.4 million for defense-related research at the University of Connecticut.

Rep. John B. Larson, D-1st District, said the spending plan was good news for Connecticut defense contractors.

"The defense programs that are critical to Connecticut and our armed forces are fully funded," Larson said. "This is a very strong budget in terms of meeting both our immediate and long-term military and national security needs."